

#### BOOK REVIEW

David Rylaarsdam. *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of His Theology and Preaching*. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxvi + 317 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-1987-1538-2. \$125.00.

David M. Rylaarsdam is Professor of the History of Christianity and Worship at Calvin Theological Seminary. His monograph, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy* traces the concept of adaptability in John Chrysostom's theology. Due to God being incomprehensible, he relates to human beings by approaching them within their limitations. This, Rylaarsdam argues, is the core of Chrysostom's totalizing Christian discourse, which transforms the classical traditions of rhetoric, philosophy, and *pai-deia*.

The book is split into two sections: “Divine Pedagogy” and “Imitation,” each containing three chapters. The first section develops Chrysostom’s theology of adaptation, which he inherited from the classical tradition and previous Christian theologians.

Chapter 1 outlines the concept of adaptability in the classical tradition, exhibited by authors such as Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Then, adaptation is examined within the Christian tradition through the work of Origen and Athanasius. Chrysostom represents a synthesis of the two, understanding God as an adaptive orator. God, Chrysostom argues, is humble and approaches his audience on their level to persuade them to live a heavenly life on earth.

Chapter 2 investigates how God’s pedagogy demonstrates features of classical education. God communicates through corporeal images, appropriating both human customs and language to create perceptible models for imitation. God varies his teaching by using harsh and gentle tones, mixing lowly and lofty

teachings, and making ethical and cultural concessions to humanity. Finally, God's pedagogy is gradual and proceeds to instruct both individuals and the entire human race over a long period.

Chapter 3 argues that Chrysostom's theology is coherent, with adaptation at its core. God, though transcendent, reveals himself analogically and adapts himself to humanity. Scripture serves as an example of this as it is precise in its teaching, consistent when self-referencing, and friendly in its dialogue with humanity. God mingles theology and rhetoric to teach humanity. Jesus is the ultimate embodiment of this adaptation because in him God becomes man, and thus the divine and human elements intermingle.

The second section of this book illustrates how God's pedagogy is imitated by Paul, how it should be imitated by priests, and how it is imitated by Chrysostom.

Chapter 4 argues that Paul is the perfect imitation of God's adaptation. Paul is the teacher of the whole world, bringing many people to Christ. He adapts to all people, mixing lowly and lofty teaching so that all might come to Christ. He is a concrete model of virtue that everyone can follow, and he leads the church along gradually, sometimes being strict and harsh while other times being gentle.

Chapter 5 depicts Chrysostom's understanding of the ideal priest. They are to blend the Greek philosophic ideal, the monastic life, and the scriptural models. They are to teach heavenly philosophy in the church, transforming the worldview and lifestyle of their hearers. They are to live as ascetics in the midst of the city, engaging the world without copying it. They ought to follow Paul as the perfect pastoral example. Finally, they must adapt their preaching to their audience, imitating God's pedagogy, and teach them to become adaptive teachers themselves, thus, transforming the city and society into a kind of heaven on earth.

Chapter 6 reveals that Chrysostom's homiletic approach is through adaptation. He imitates the divine pedagogy by using corporeal images, both through depicting saints and biblical stories. He uses these to lead his audience from sensible realities to

spiritual truths. Chrysostom appropriates the theater's own rhetorical methods to undermine it and replace it with the church. He too varies his teaching with harsh and gentle tones and lowly and lofty teachings, but often gets frustrated with his congregation for their lack of progress.

This book has a good deal of repetitive material. This is partly due to the overlapping goals of illustrating the divine pedagogy and discussing imitation of it. After the pedagogy is established, the second half of the book repeats much of that same material through those who demonstrate it. Paul exemplifies it, priests should strive for it, and Chrysostom himself uses it. However, this causes the second half of the book to be bloated with repeated information, making some sections seem unnecessarily long. The material on Paul, for instance, could be condensed and placed in another chapter. Rylaarsdam does not engage the question of how Chrysostom imposes his pedagogy onto God. The book's focus is on Chrysostom within his historical context, so it does not try to legitimize his pedagogy. However, this book would have benefited from an evaluative chapter on the pedagogy of adaptation, either as a hermeneutic to Scripture or as an approach to Christian theology in general.

Positively, the central thesis of this book is clear and convincing. Rylaarsdam does a great job of exposing Chrysostom's pedagogy and theological understanding of God's adaptation. He does this through a wide study of the primary texts. The result is a logical through line between Chrysostom's hermeneutic and his encompassing pastoral approach to theology. It shows his moral preaching to be inherently theological.

This analysis of Chrysostom's theology provides a good framework in which to situate his understanding of doctrine, as this book shows how central it is to his theological makeup. It is a necessary read for any student interested in John Chrysostom and is important for the broader study of Patristic authors as many of them are also situated in the same tradition as Chrysostom. Finally, I recommend it to the students of pastoral theology. Chrysostom depicts God's pedagogy of adaptation as the model for ministry. For him, imitating Christ means imitating his pedagogy.

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